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ABSTRACT

Meditation is the practice of becoming still--training the mind to slow down. Researchers have acknowledged the "technical" relationship between meditation and writing. Meditation can become part of the writing process, particularly for those who experience writing apprehension, often expressed as procrastination or writer's block. Discursive meditation can channel inner speech in a state of heightened consciousness and self-communication that enables the writer to summon thoughts about a subject. Meditating before writing offers interesting material in often vivid detail. It also offers those who write with tension or fear a different physical experience of writing. Apprehensive writers who associate writing with academic tasks and audiences may benefit from an experience in which writing is not a goal but part of a healing process that includes meditation. Such writing is not evaluated, and may not even be read. While it seems particularly capitalistic to think of meditation as a means to an end, in Zen, the practice of meditation is all, and meditators are cautioned against becoming too attached to outcomes or insights. Anyone on a spiritual journey should combine writing and meditating, and should seek a spiritual site of composing wherever people gather to acknowledge their divinity and affirm their spiritual connection. (SG)

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"Writing to Heal: Using Meditation in the Writing Process"

• How many in here have meditated? How many have not?

• How many have experienced some form of writer's block? How many have not? Thank you.

I've been teaching college writing for ten years and meditating for seven years, and for the last four years I've woven the two in workshops I've led--at a bookstore, in a therapist's office, and most frequently through Unity, a center for spiritual growth. These workshops were not associated with a university, yet many participants were undergraduate and graduate university students who chose to go outside the academy to re-discover an earlier joy in writing or to seek help with writer's block. The uniformly positive response of all participants in the workshops "Easy Writer" and "Writing to Heal" and my own delight as a writing facilitator have led me to examine the dichotomy between personal and public writing in the college assignments I give. I think this dichotomy is as much a manifestation of my reluctance to let students truly set their own agendas as it is a product of my perceived responsibility to introduce them to academic writing. Lots of factors can account for the increased joy and insight writing brought to the workshop participants. The writing I assign college students does not often ask them to explore a personal topic, nor is the process ever an end in itself. I always evaluate or see some final product, even if students select which ones. In the university, I'm an authority with institutional power

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which affects my actions and theirs, and often they aren't there voluntarily. But the difference I want to talk about today is my use of meditation in the writing workshops. I believe it was meditation that allowed novice writers to explore the inarticulate and blocked writers to move through their apprehension and write with authority.

Meditation is the practice of becoming still, training the mind to slow down. James Moffett and Ira Progoff have written extensively on the "technical" relationship between meditation and writing, and rather than explain how the two processes work together, I'd like to discuss some consequences when meditation becomes part of the writing process, particularly for those who experience writing apprehension, often expressed as procrastination, or writing block, defined here as the unfulfilled completion of an individual's writing goal.

In his article "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation," Moffett defines meditation as granting "some control of inner speech ranging from merely watching it to focusing it to suspending it altogether" (107), and "the aim of discursive meditation is to channel and intensify inner speech in a state of heightened consciousness and self-communication that enables the writer to summon all he is capable of saying about the subject" (132). Gordon Rohman has written of meditation as "a heuristic model, something which served to unlock discovery" (110) and he urged teachers to include it in their pre-writing repertoire.

Meditations I lead begin with participants closing their eyes, and noticing their breathing. (Feel free to try this if it feels comfortable.) After a few moments of deep breaths, participants concentrate on their bodies, noticing any areas that call attention. We can relax our bodies by sending our exhalation to tense areas, or imagining a warm light filling us from

feet to head. Having tended our bodies, we turn our minds to an image, perhaps a grassy field or a comfortable room, in which we place ourselves. Once the image is clear and detailed, the meditator remains in this place, relaxed and safe, observing the thoughts that move through her mind, but becoming attached to none of them.

Meditating before writing offers all writers interesting material in often vivid detail. When I led an exercise at a high school, the students seemed most impressed with how easy it was to write once they had visualized what they wanted to share. Many of the fifth and sixth graders I worked with doubled the amount of writing they usually produced in one sitting and were astonished at the power of their imaginations that the meditation tapped. One boy wrote "That was incredible! I have never experienced anything like that in my life! It was so realistic! I could hear birds twerping, feel the mist through my body, see the cabin, and then slowly come back to the room."

Meditation also offers those who frequently write with tension or fear a different physical experience of writing. One woman I've worked with wrote "What makes writing hard for me is the concept of "hardness" in culture/history/sexuality. "Hard" is a value that masculinist institutions preserve and demand. Writing should be hard to be good, to be smart, to say anything worthwhile. Writing is hard and solid and perfectly logical, self-contained and impervious to attack." With this definition, she felt isolated and alienated from writing, as if there were no register for her voice. Apprehensive writers who associate writing with academic tasks and audiences may benefit from a softer writing experience, where the writing is not the goal but part of a healing process that includes meditation, and the writing is not evaluated, may not even be read.

Writing block can occur when a writer is not concentrating in the present; her thoughts may be on the future, fearing an audience's response, or on the past, remembering failures. But blocked writers can also be present and in a negative tailspin, resisting their knowledge and abilities--I have nothing to say, or I can't say it perfectly, or I'm stupid, I'm no good. In observing and suspending thoughts, meditation can help the writer release those self-defeating tapes. Writing may be scary because it insists we be aware of our thoughts and feelings, in all their confusing contradictions. In our culture, we don't get a lot of encouragement to be still enough to learn what we think, feel, know, believe, fear, or desire. Instead of embracing time to sit in silence, many of us fill those moments between obligations or words with anything we can find: food, cigarettes, work or worry. For instance, a person may compulsively eat for years to avoid certain feelings until they learn that sitting empty for a while does not kill them and there are more productive ways to fulfill needs. Rather than view their compulsive eating as a personal weakness, they can read it as a sign of a need and intervene in the patterned way of responding. Similarly, a writing block can be read as a protective measure taken to keep the writer from examining some issue, exploring a memory, or experiencing a feeling. At the root of a writing block is fear, and meditation offers a space, at once both private and public, where fears or pain can be named, traced, embraced, and eventually released.

What's key in addressing any fear is the willing participation of the blocked writer. I've been working with blocked writers and would like to share one case study that illustrates the role meditation can play in addressing writing apprehension. Susan had been blocked from writing a journalism piece for two years. She was researching the place of

ignorance in medicine and had traveled to interview a physician designing an innovative curriculum on this topic. She hadn't written the piece the first year and had flown back to interview again and get fresh for the writing. Six months later, although she had successfully written an academic grant to write the article, she hadn't produced the piece and would have to repay the grant money. She described her writing block this way: "I just feel stuck . . . It feels the way it used to when I was first starting to write. When I was second only to my friend they called the stone cutter in terms of slowness." The importance of the project (she said "it resonated with every fiber of my being, almost on a cellular level") contributed pressure for her to get it right, but Susan also thought the block might be due to a lack of information. "I think that I don't have the material because I haven't gotten these doctors to *really disclose at the very deep level* I need in order to get what I want to write what I want." [I need] "deep material . . . before I can write with authority, which is what I really want to do . . . maybe this is a lot about wanting to be in the world with authority and integrity." Susan looked for that authority in others' information rather than seeking it in her own understanding of what she already knew. After completing a clustering exercise, modeled on Gabriele Rico's work, she wrote a letter of assurance to the scared part in herself which was refusing to write. That letter includes some images of violence and concludes

> They are not here with you now, in this body, in this mind. The present is safe. It is a harbor for you. A nest. A home with a fireplace and flames dancing on our faces. With songs and shoulders touching with the smells of food cooking on the kitchen stove. Christmas feelings--without all the presents and the anger

and the guilt. The simple feelings. This is the place, little girl, the place you need to write from . . . with the present, with who you are.

Yet even at this point, intellectually understanding her need for more authority did not make the writing easy. Susan needed to experience herself as an authority, which a guided meditation offered. In the meditation, Susan re-experienced being born, coming into light with unfocused figures and shadows. Afterwards, she recorded the experience, writing "'from where I sit right now I think I should feel scared but I don't. It's all very interesting, this new place I'm coming into. And I feel powerful, unstained and pure and the center of the universe. The world is in me, I don't feel the hurt or the pain, just a strong sense that I'm here, this is where I should be." Susan learned that power was her natural state of being, yet she had learned to deny and avoid that power. After this exercise, she made a list of steps and established a timetable for her work on this article. (This happened so recently I can't report on its completion.)

Susan had already articulated a connection between the topic of the paper and her life, but it was the clustering and meditating that provided an experience to counter her sense of herself as someone without authority in the world. To me, Susan's case is an example of healing, a word not often used in academic discussions of writing, perhaps because healing has become the province of those credentialized to heal: physicians, psychologists, perhaps ministers, but surely not writing teachers. Don't we already have enough to do anyway? In a context of western medicine "healing" may connote a passivity of the healed and a power of the healer that I do not intend. Rather, I'm using healing to describe a process whereby someone seeks new understanding, knowledge, or acceptance about something that is currently giving them pain. The role of the

"healer" in this definition is to create a safe environment in which writers can be vulnerable enough to look at their pain. Equally important, a healer loves others as they are, so the writers know no matter what they produce, they themselves are accepted in this forum. By defining healing as awareness, I'm not talking about miraculous, totally happy endings. As Geneen Roth, author of Feeding the Hungry Heart and other books, writes "The purpose of healing is not to be forever happy: that is impossible. The purpose of healing is to be awake. And to live while you are alive instead of dying while you are alive. Healing is about being broken and whole at the same time" (171).

It's perhaps a particularly capitalist perspective to think of meditation as a means to an end. In Zen the practice of meditation is all, and meditators are cautioned against becoming too attached to outcomes or insights. Indeed, when we immerse ourselves in the present, without expectations or resistance, we experience our connection with Spirit, which is the source of all healing although that healing may come through many channels--another's hands, medicine, new thoughts, memories, breath. Stephen Levine describes the process of becoming more aware as follows: "As concentration develops, awareness receives previously unnoticed realms of being. Then the journey seems not somewhere we are going but an increasing appreciation of where we are. Awareness heals. All that we have sought is found in this very instant, being itself, the ever-healed, the ever-uninjured" (210). When we speak and write from an ever-healed place, we're engaged in what Moffett calls "authentic authoring."

That authentic authoring may take the form of academic prose, which we should no doubt continue to teach college students. But the costs of such instruction alone is evident in writer's block and apprehension. If

along with Peter Elbow, you incorporate "nonacademic" discourse in college writing courses because as he puts it, "Life is long and college is short" I urge you to consider alternative composing processes as well. The limits of the academy are occasionally self-imposed, as I learned when students in the argumentative writing course I'm currently teaching read an earlier draft of this paper and asked to experience meditating and writing. They didn't understand why they'd only been doing 'hard' writing in class.

Finally, I'd like to encourage anyone on a spiritual journey to combine writing and meditating and to seek a spiritual site of composing in your community where you can offer your talents. Spiritual sites of composing are located wherever people gather to acknowledge their divinity and affirm their spiritual connection. This healing work may be the most important and the most rewarding service we do.

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